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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the implications of the California Statewide Longitudinal Study (SLS) of community college students with respect to college admissions and records, and concerns such as recruitment, registration, attrition, grading, probation and dismissal, and reporting. After an introduction to the institutional role of admissions and records and a discussion of changes in college missions and student objectives, selected SLS findings and their implications are presented. In terms of recruitment, the fact that 58% of the students had left high school 1 year or less prior to entering the community colleges suggests a need for a close working relationship with high schools and raises questions of how to reach those who are not recent high school students. With respect to registration, the high percentage of students with zero active units on the first day of classes suggests that methods should be developed to allow for more efficient and effective use of data processing resources. With regard to grading policies, the finding that a large number of students are not concerned with grades or college credit suggests that the introduction of stringent grading policies could have a negative impact on community college students. Finally, the finding that 41% of the day students and 60% of the evening students were not attending classes to receive credit suggests that attrition in the traditional sense may be an inapplicable term for today's community colleges. (HB)

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COMMENTS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STATEWIDE LONGITUDINAL STUDY

by Margaret L. Dominici

I. Introduction

The data from the Statewide Longitudinal Study provides a wealth of information about today's community college student and has relevance for all facets of the institution. This paper addresses the implications of the Statewide Longitudinal Study from an Admissions and Records perspective.

In the typical California community college, Admissions and Records serves several basic "nuts and bolts" institutional functions. It is both the marketing and sales department of an institution; it is the depository for the "currency" of the student educational experience, record of course work, grades and credits; it is the accounting department of those "sales", or class enrollments, which translate into contact hours and ultimately apportionment. Most of these activities have direct financial implications for the student and/or district.

Admissions and Records deals with several primary service populations during a given year: the enrolled student, the potential student, the past student and the faculty.

II. Background

Perhaps Hunter and Sheldon best characterized the significance of their study when they wrote, "The importance of these findings lies in the capacity for increased understanding of the community college

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'mission' they provide. It has become evident during the study that students tend to generate their own goals, enroll in and drop classes at will, glean from courses the information they want, and leave when their own personal goals have been acheived or are not being met. This indicates that the mission of the community college is determined to a far greater extent by the students than by other groups, e.g. Boards of Trustees, academic senates, college administrations." (Report 3 p. 56)

The California community college is an equalitarian model. Admission is available to any high school graduate or anyone 18 years or older who can profit from the education. They are tuition free with only nominal fees. Until recently, a majority of the colleges had liberal grading policies which allowed students to drop out without grade penalty at almost any point.

The sixties and seventies were decades of phenomenal growth in higher education and for community colleges, yet, among decision makers, faulty assumptions prevailed as to who was participating in and who was contributing to that growth. Assumptions were made that growth was, although non-traditional in demographic character, traditional in purpose and mission. Hunter and Sheldon indicate basic population has not changed; however, the growth population has and cannot be measured against traditional standards.

For an institution, business agency, etc. to be successful, it must understand its service population. A major contribution of the study is that it provides that understanding. It allows the community college to know its market and potential market. The Statewide Longitudinal Study

provides marketing information that has relevance for a myriad of Admissions and Records activities ranging from recruiting to record custody.

III. Implications

This paper is limited to selected issues and concerns related to Admissions and Records including recruiting, registration, attrition, grading, probation and dismissal, and reporting. The study has documented and given creditability to perceptions and awareness that Admissions and Records people have had as to the identity of the community college student. Admissions and Records is one of the few administrative divisions of the community college that interacts with the total student population. It is also the most likely contact for potential students as well as former students.

The study has implications for recruiting in terms of groups targeted and materials used. The data regarding years out of school showed 46 percent of the sample had no break between last school attended and admission to community college and that virtually all were recent high school graduates. Another 12 percent had a one-year break which means that a total of 58 percent were recently out of high school. Sixty-one percent of the sample indicated the last school attended was high school.

The data supports a need for a close working relationship with high schools and articulation with local high schools. However, it also raises the question as to how the community college can satisfactorily reach those that are not recent high school students.

Most recruiting materials, especially the catalog, are aimed at traditional program oriented students. The space allocated in most

catalogs would lead the casual observer to believe that all community college students are transfer or vocational in nature. However, in Report 2, Hunter and Sheldon dispel this as a myth: "The data collected the first year of the Statewide Longitudinal Study are certainly sufficient to dispel the myth that: 1) California community colleges are primarily two-year colleges, 2) Most students who matriculate finish their lower division requirements and transfer to a university as juniors, 3) A large proportion of students enroll in and complete a two-year vocational program." (Part II pp. 78-9)

For registration the study has implications that should allow for more efficient and effective uses of resources. It is expensive to process paper and enter data onto electronic data processing systems, yet it appears that a substantial amount of the processing is wasted motion.

Students with zero active units who were categorized as ZAUS students provide some significant data. The category included 14 1/2% of the original sample of 1,189 cases. Even though 48 percent of the 1,189 had initiated the registration process by either filing only an application or by filing an application and enrolling and dropping classes by the first day of class, they had no active units on the first day of class. The remainder of the ZAUS students had no active units at First Census week. Colleges with early registration dates before the first day of classes had more ZAUS students than those with registration periods closer to the beginning of classes.

Curricular implications are significant since every student who signs up for a class and eventually drops it distorts course enrollments

and displaces another student, who, in the case of a closed class, is excluded and subsequently may redirect his/her educational goals. The interest in less popular courses is skewed by diverting enrollments from closed to non-closed classes which might otherwise be without enrollment.

During interviews, the reasons this group gave for not attending are not circumstances over which the college has much control, but rather more reflective of the community college student's identity and the rank of education among the student's priorities. "In rank order, the most popular reasons for not attending college were job conflict (15 percent), indefinite motivation (12 percent), accepted another college (11 percent), job preference over school (11 percent), moved (7 percent), and illness (6 percent)." (Part 1 p. 29)

The California community college has an open door tradition, but with retrenchment, the need to cut back or at least maintain a no growth mode, means of monitoring or limiting enrollments in impacted classes are being discussed and implemented. If the community college student is not program oriented and majors are valueless, some of the traditional standards used for determing registration priorities, such as number of units completed in a specific program or a student's major, are superficial.

Attrition has been an "in" concern in higher education recently. However, in the traditional sense, attrition may be an inapplicable term for today's community college. Forty-one percent of the day students and sixty percent of the evening students said that receiving credit was not a reason for taking classes, yet sixty-two percent of the day and sixty-nine percent of the evening students responded positively to goal attainment.

Evening students, though taking fewer courses than day students, appeared more persistent with regard to maintaining the classes in which they enrolled. Day students completed more classes.

If the researchers' conclusion that a large number of students are not concerned with either grades or course credit is valid, the recently adopted Title V grading policy could have a disastrous effect on today's community college student. A lack of relevance (or perhaps reverence) for grades and course credit is alien to academic tradition. The new grading policy applies to cumulative units for academic and progress probation. The liberal W policy entrenched on some campuses combined with probation policies which applied only to students completing or attempting 12 units, tended to negate the impact of probation. The minimum standards of the new Title V regulations mandates that students receive evaluative grades in courses enrolled in beyond 75 percent of the course. The new policy establishes stringent standards for removing probation and dismissal may occur at the end of three semesters. It would be interesting to know how many schools in the study had liberal W policies.

The finding that most students are not interested in credit at the time they enroll for courses must be treated cautiously. It could lead to a detrimental blaseness toward grades and/or credit for class. In reality, it is not unusual to have students who were not interested in credits or grades at the time they were enrolled come back years later trying to locate an old record or to have an error corrected. Often delayed interest is sparked because of monetary value related to a job.

The comparisons between sample and census data on three data elements,

sex ratio, age and ethnicity, showed no significant difference between census and sample data for two data elements, age and sex ratio. The authors' conclusion that perhaps state and federal reports could be based on random samples rather than entire populations merits further investigation. In these times of rising costs and staff re-entrenchment, a sizeable resources savings might be acheived by gathering sample rather than complete data.

The 18 prototypes developed by Hunter and Sheldon are very descriptive and give an insight into the nature of the community college student not discernable from the data submitted on the multitude of state and federal reports. By using a sample drawn from the traditional academic calendar, the study excluded students who enrolled in late starting, short-term classes. On some campuses this is a sizeable number of students.

IV. Conclusion

The study has special significance in today's post Proposition 13 environment. Proposition 13's impact is not limited to financial constraints, but reflects an attitudinal change of society. Education, a once sacrosanct area, is being held accountable. Greater controls are being imposed on schools and funding is no longer a blank check. In order for an institution to effectively allocate its resources, it must understand its service population.

The reoccuring themes throughout the study are that the community college lacks control over, or responsibility for, student actions such

as dropping classes, opting for no credit, taking classes for other than transfer or degree purposes, etc.; and that there is need to examine institutional performance standards in terms of the real student. Systems and policies should be developed that are in concert with the student of the 80's.

The study will no doubt stimulate discussions and questions that will effect the current and future mission of the community college.

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